

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION IN MONTANA AND THE DAKOTAS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

This briefing paper outlines the major ongoing efforts toward greater sage-grouse conservation in Montana, North and South Dakota, beyond the specific measures developed as part of BLM's project-planning processes.

ISSUES:

In Montana, the BLM continues to participate in three greater sage-grouse local working groups (LWGs) (Dillon, Miles City and Glasgow) that were established under the final *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana* (hereafter *Management Plan*), led by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). Through this forum, Montana BLM biologists work with other greater sage-grouse stakeholders to adapt the state plan down to the local level, and to identify and implement projects that will fulfill the goals of the conservation strategies, including crested wheatgrass re-seeding projects and noxious weed control in important seasonal habitats. The BLM also partners with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and FWP to fund a coordinator position for the purpose of enhancing the function of LWGs and finding new ways to achieve greater sage-grouse conservation across ownerships. North and South Dakota BLM staffs have also participated in development of plans led by their state agencies. North Dakota's plan is complete; South Dakota is refining its draft.

Yearly lek monitoring and data sharing with the state agencies is a high priority for all offices. Data protocols have been developed with local FWP offices to facilitate information sharing, and BLM coordinates inventory and monitoring efforts with FWP, industry, and non-governmental organizations to maximize efficiency. The BLM provides funding for various research projects related to greater sage-grouse, greater sage-grouse habitat, and BLM's multiple-use management of public lands. These ongoing projects include studies that examine opportunities to control West Nile Virus; and research, inventory, and monitoring to identify important seasonal habitats, movements, and survival. BLM has also supported recent studies that examine winter survival, the effects of coal bed natural gas (CBNG) development, and the relationship between West Nile Virus and natural and man-made water sources. In addition, BLM staff and partners are working on resource management plan (RMP) revisions that will cover most of the important BLM-managed sage-grouse habitat in the three states.

In addition to the ongoing work summarized above, the relationship between greater sage-grouse and energy development is a primary emerging issue in Montana and Wyoming, based on availability of new information about the effects of CBNG development and West Nile Virus. Recent research suggests greater sage-grouse population declines in areas of CBNG development in Wyoming, and BLM is currently working with researchers, industry representatives, and FWP to fully understand the variety of available information collected by BLM and others and incorporate the most up-to-date greater sage-grouse conservation actions into its Coal Bed Natural Gas Supplemental EIS, which applies to the Billings and Miles City Field Offices, as well as the Miles City RMP, the lease nomination and sale process, and project analyses. The BLM has a close working relationship with FWP through the Miles City Energy Pilot Office, and is also coordinating with Montana FWP on potential updates to the *Management Plan*.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Through the NEPA and planning processes, the BLM will determine an adaptive management approach that applies the best available science/information to ensure that the public lands continue to be available for BLM's multiple uses while conserving greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. These efforts are especially important in light of the upcoming re-evaluation by the US Fish & Wildlife Service of its 2005 listing decision as "not warranted" and the recent release of a 10-page report on sage-grouse by fish and game agencies from several states.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The director recognizes BLM's role in sagebrush habitat management and greater sage-grouse conservation. As a good steward of the land, the agency will continue to focus resources and efforts on conserving sagebrush and greater sage-grouse on BLM-managed lands. All these efforts will feed into future conservation and restoration opportunities under the Director's Healthy Lands emphasis.

CONTACT:

Katie A. Stevens, planning and environmental coordinator, (406) 896-5246